

## Module 1: Student resource 1.3

Source: Based on an article by Renae Barker in [The Conversation, 14 May 2015](https://theconversation.com/is-australia-a-secular-country-it-depends-what-you-mean-38222)

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(updated here to reflect the 2021 census data).

### Is Australia a secular country?

Australia is often described as a secular country. But is it? What does it mean to be secular? Is permitting halal certification, the wearing of Islamic headscarves, religious chaplains in state schools or political lobbying by religious organisations inconsistent with a secular Australia?

Ultimately, the answer comes down to what you mean by “secular” and “secularism”.

#### Three forms of secularism

In his book *A Secular Age*, Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor identified three different forms of secularism.

First, secularism can mean the complete removal of God and religion from the public sphere. France has this version of secularism. Children attending government-funded schools in France are prohibited from wearing overt religious symbols – as are public officials.

This version of secularism is sometimes described as a *strict separation of church and state*, or in France as *laïcité*. This form of secularism does not necessarily mean a decrease in religious belief by



*Separation of Church and State: Asher Doig*

the population. Instead, religion is simply removed to the private sphere. The state can be secular while its population is religious.

Taylor’s second form of secularism concerns the *level of religiosity* of the population. In this version, there is a measurable reduction in religious belief and practice. This may occur even where the state still supports religion.

Taylor argues this has already taken place in much of Western Europe. For example, in the United Kingdom a significant proportion of the population identify with having no religion, despite the Church

of England still being the established church. In this version the people are atheist while the state may be religious.

In Taylor’s third version of secularism, religious belief is *just one option for both the state and its people*. Religion is not removed from the public sphere; rather it is just one voice among many, including those with no religion.

As a result, a state may have a relatively high level of interaction with religion and still be considered secular so long as the state does not endorse one religion to the exclusion of other points of view. Countries that conform with this form of secularism may also be described as religiously plural.

#### What about Australia?

Ultimately, whether or not you consider Australia to be secular will depend on the definition of secularism you use. The best fit for Australia is arguably Taylor’s third form of secularism.

Section 116 of the Australian Constitution provides that:

*The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.*

As a result, the federal government cannot establish a state church. However, the state does

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interact with religion. For example, the federal government funds schools run by religious organisations and recognises marriages conducted by religious celebrants. This rules out Taylor's first form of secularism.

The 2021 census showed that less than half the population identifies with a religion, and the numbers are decreasing with each census. But Australia is still a country where the state has extensive interaction with religion.

Secularism in Australia means no state church. It means giving people a choice between belief and unbelief. It means religious leaders may lobby for their point of view but so too may leaders of atheist, humanist and rationalist organisations.

Under Taylor's third form of secularism, accommodating Islamic or Christian (or any other religion's) practices, or permitting chaplains to operate in state schools, does not transform Australia into a Muslim or Christian country. Australia is still secular, but it has a form of secularism where religion is allowed in the public sphere. As long as religion remains one voice among many and one option among many Australia will remain a secular country.

For those who advocate a strict separation of church and state, as in Taylor's first form of secularism, this is likely to be an uncomfortable conclusion. For those who support this first position, the only way in which a country can truly live up to the ideals of secularism is if religion is completely separated from the state and as a consequence removed almost completely from the

public sphere. Those who take this position are not wrong; this is one possible meaning of secularism. However, it is not the only meaning.

The definition of secularism you choose will ultimately determine your answer to the question: Is Australia a secular country?

### Activity

- Produce a chart that illustrates the 3 types of secularism described above.
- Research the changes in the numbers of Australians identifying as religious and non-religious between the 1921 census and the 2021 census.
- With a partner, research and decide whether the following countries are secular, and if so, which one of Taylor's 3 types of secularism best fits:
  - China
  - Norway
  - Canada.